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ABSTRACT

The persistent cultural conservatism in Western scholarship has led to the exclusion of Chinese rhetoric from the canon of rhetorical studies. However, the assumption that Chinese culture does not have a rhetorical tradition is misleading and inappropriate. It stems from any number of notions: that the Chinese language is not as logical as those of Western cultures; that rhetoric is an outgrowth of democracy while China's system of politics is hierarchical; that rhetoric is about logical thinking as defined by Western culture. Robert Oliver, however, contends that rhetoric should be seen as a culturally relative term, designating a "mode of thinking." While it is true that the Chinese political system is hierarchical--no two people are considered equal--this system engendered its own kind of rhetoric. The Machiavellian rhetorical theories of Han Fei-tzu illustrate the necessity of a certain kind of persuasion suited to the imbalance of power between the speaker and listener. Couching and phrasing an argument correctly could be a matter of life and death in ancient China. In ancient Chinese oratory, the speaker is always male, a person of authority and nobility; his motive is to carry out his social duty, for example, to help the ruler make just policies and promote social harmony. The audience is usually one person, the ruler, who is passive and less cooperative than the audience generally envisioned in Western rhetorical theories. (Contains 22 references.) (TB)

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"Who Knows Not But Speaks Is Not Wise; Who Knows But Speaks Not Is Not Loyal!": Rhetoric of Philosophical Wisdom in Ancient China

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In his recent attempt to conceptualize the rhetorical significance of Lao-tzu's Tao Te Ching, Krish Kowal laments that such as important work, which was translated more often than any single Greek or Latin text, has not been included in the canon of rhetorical studies. He attributes this exclusion, not to lingering ethnocentrism, but rather to persistent cultural conservatism in Western scholarship. As Kowal points out, severe consequences have resulted this exclusion. It has, for example, led some Western rhetoricians to presume that ancient China "lacks a rhetorical tradition" and that "Chinese thinking is not as 'logical' as 'Western thought' (Bloom, *Shaping*; Kaplan, 'Counter-Fact')" (5).

There are more reasons for Western rhetoricians to infer that ancient China lacked a rhetorical tradition. First, democracy, which is considered one of the major contributing factors to the rise of Western rhetoric, was not a part of the social history in ancient China. As George Kennedy notes, "oratory flourished most in the democracies and least under tyranny" (29). Ancient Chinese society developed a sharp hierarchy which, according to Western rhetoricians, yielded no possibility for a well-developed rhetorical tradition (Becker 76-85). Another reason surfaces in the on-going debate on the nature of the classical Chinese language. Carl Becker and Hajime Nakamura, for instance, contend that the classical Chinese language, especially its written form, was ambiguous, less logical than Western languages, and could not

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impart any abstract thought. Both suggest that the classical Chinese language failed to function as a tool for public speech and communication.

No matter what the reasons are, the presumption that a rhetorical tradition was not a part of ancient Chinese culture is inappropriate and misleading. This claim clearly results from an attempt to define rhetoric of ancient China in Western terms. As Robert Oliver contends, rhetoric is not merely an art of speech or persuasion but rather, "a mode of thinking" or a mode of "adjusting ideas to people, people to people, and ideas to ideas" (8). The purpose of this paper is to argue that rhetoric is not universal in nature. Rather, it is an integral part of a given culture. Through examining ancient Chinese philosophical thinking and writing (due to time constraint, I'll focus on the philosophies of Han Fei-tzu), I will provide consistent evidence for a richly-embedded rhetorical tradition in ancient Chinese philosophies. In conclusion, I will show some more notable differences between Western and Chinese rhetorics.

The social constructionist doctrine of reality has long pointed out that all knowledge is socially constructed (Kuhn; Rorty; Geertz; Gergen; Bruffee; and Berger and Luckmann); ideas, concepts, and methods are created and diffused by "communities of like-minded peers" (Bruffee 777). This means that, to borrow Berger and Luckmann's example, "what is 'real' to a Tibetan monk may not be 'real' to an American businessman" (2). The same is true in terms of rhetoric. Carolyn Matalene eloquently writes that rhetoric is the "verbal equivalent of ecology, the study of relationships that exist between an organism and its environment" (789). She explains that "both rhetoric and ecology are disciplines that emphasize the inescapable and, to a great extent, decisive influence of local conditions" (789). She refers "local conditions" to

the social contexts of a rhetoric. From this perspective, we can say that what appeared "rhetoric" to Aristotle may not be "rhetoric" to Confucius, and vice versa because, just like the Tibetan monk and the American businessman, Aristotle and Confucius neither lived in the same social world nor were "like-minded." This leads us to see that rhetoric is not universal in nature, but an integral part of a given socio-cultural context; different societies yield different ways of thinking and different nature, norms, and practices of and attitudes toward rhetoric.

Western rhetoric originated in ancient Greece where widespread social reforms in the sixth century B. C. brought about the earliest form of democracy (Printice; Starr; and Jones). Rhetoric or oratory was intrinsic to the daily life of the democratic Greeks. The involved Athenians, for example, had to make speeches before the magistrates and the jury to protect their own interests (Kennedy 1-2). Speaking-well was "the prerequisite for participation in the assembly" (Starr 15). After all, face-to-face argument was an important part of ancient Greek epistemology; a speaker had to employ reasoning, such as "the Aristotelian logic," to arrive at new knowledge (Goody 219, 278; Goody and Watt 331). Given the conditions of ancient Greek society and the significance of rhetoric to ancient Greek mind, it is no wonder that rhetoric included such great rhetoricians as Plato, Aristotle, and Quintilian, and such extensive amount of works as Phaedrus, Rhetorica, and that it was institutionalized as a mode of inquiry, independent of philosophy and other social sciences, all well-documented by such great study as Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg's The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present.

But Western rhetoric is only Western. In contrast to ancient Greece, ancient Chinese society was sharply hierarchical and remained unchanged over the course of many centuries. The basic social structure of ancient China was like a pyramid. On the top lived the Emperor and his royal family, in the middle the emperor's magistrates and other elites, and on the bottom the oppressed peasantry who had no participation in state affairs. The value system underlying this social structure was characterized by the doctrines of "harmony, continuity, and stability" (Oliver Communication 86). Compatible with these social doctrines was the ancient Chinese belief of "inequality" and "relinquishment of freedom" (Eberhard 5-13). According to Wolfam Eberhard, ancient Chinese society was based on the assumption that "no two persons are ever equal; always one is higher than the other" (6). This is well-manifested by the so-called five relationships: ruler and the ruled, father and son, husband and wife (Eberhard 6; Yu 121). Social order derived from the citizens' strict adherence to these relationships and personal freedom.

With these social values and beliefs, public speech in the Western sense was obviously not encouraged in ancient Chinese social, political, and legal arenas because it could cause conflicts and disturb social harmony; public speech and debate, if allowed, would be conducted in accord with certain social norms, such as etiquettes, rituals, and accepted expressions. Rhetoric in the Western sense was not basic to the ancient Chinese epistemological method either. The ancient Chinese assumed that only two kinds of knowledge were available: knowledge of facts accumulated in the matter of time and knowledge of wisdom derived from one's experience (Chan 143) and that the basic means to knowledge were inference, analogy, testimony, and intuition (Hughes 78), which ruled confrontational argument out of the

picture. Most importantly, no scholar devoted any academic attention to rhetoric, and virtually, no single work was explicitly written to distinguish rhetoric. As a result, rhetoric was never recognized as an independent mode of inquiry in ancient China.

But all these do not prove that rhetoric, as a mode of thinking, did not exist in ancient China. In fact, rhetoric was always an important part of ancient Chinese thoughts. According to Oliver, rhetoric in ancient China "received continuous attention as an essential and integral part of generalized philosophical speculation" even though it was never "separated from philosophy" (Communication 260). Indeed, in view of the philosophical thinking of Han Fei-tzu alone, we can see that a richly embedded rhetorical tradition, reflecting ancient Chinese social conditions and ways of knowing, is eminently evident.

Han Fei-tzu, the "Machiavelli of China" as Oliver calls him, lived at the time (about third century B. C.) when his native state of Han was weakened by domestic chaos and faced the extreme danger of destruction by predatory neighbors. Han encountered the same philosophical question as did Confucius, "How is man's relationship to the chaotic world?" In search for social order, Han defied Confucian moralismand distinguished himself from all ancient Chinese thinkers with a fa-jia or Legalist philosophy. To Han, moral standards were too subject to interpretation and abuse, and the nature of human being was too selfish and evil to be self-cultivated (Creel 149); Watson 11), both of which could not be relied on to restore peace and social harmony. Instead, Han believed that orderly behavior of the individual and the strength of the state would derive from legal forces. He recommended his ruler to employ a three-step administrative technique: Shi, power, Fa, law,

and Shu, policies (Creel 151). That is, if the ruler wanted to retain his power and control his people, he must employ a system of stern laws and harsh punishments, and back it up with efficient enforcement methods.

The rhetorical significance of Han's Legalist philosophy emerges from his mixed approach of forces and rhetoric to the full implement of the laws. Han knew that the highly centralized government would unavoidably abuse the laws, and the innocent mass would be mistakenly punished. He also knew that the incompetent ruler was surrounded by the glibbest people at the time. Thus, he urged the righteous counselors to use the power of persuasion to help the ruler make just administrative policies and the righteous magistrates to use proper speech to help the illiterate populace abide the laws. Han's theory of quan-fu, or "rhetorical persuasion" is self-evident by his "On the Difficulty in Speaking" and "Difficulties in the Way of Persuasion," two of his fifty-five essays on governing.

Despite the fact that Han Fei-tzu stuttered, he never belittled the value of speaking skills. In "On the Difficulty in Speaking," Han argued that the best speech was not necessarily the perfect one because, in Han's words, "doctrines and principles, however prefect, are not always practiced" (Liao 24). Specifically, as Han explained, first, accuracy was not always the most desired quality of a good speech because "weights and measures, however accurate, are not always adopted" (Liao 24); neither was sincerity because "if his speeches are sincere and courteous, straightforward and careful, he [the speaker] is then regarded as awkward and unsystematic" (Liao 23); Second, a speaker should not devalue norms and conventions in the pursuit of creativity and eloquence because "if he discards all literary forms of expression and speaks solely of the naked facts, he is then regarded as rustic"

(Liao 24), and "if his speeches are witty and eloquent and full of rhetorical excellencies, he is then regarded as flippant" (Liao 23-24); Third, a speaker should implicate rather than state his points because "if his speeches summarize minute points and present general ideas, being thus plain and concise, he is then regarded as simple and not discerning" (Liao 23); and finally, a speaker should speak of commonsense instead of personal opinions because "if his speeches are very personally observing," "he is then regarded as self-assuming and self-conceited" (Liao 23), and he should avoid going into depth because "if his speeches are profound, he is then regarded as boastful but useless" (Liao 23).

Han went on with countless examples that the most eloquent, honest, and accurate speakers, the counselors, had been tortured and killed. Why? Because the listeners, usually the rulers, were "unreasonable, violent, stupid, crooked" who "lost their lives in the long run" (Liao 27). Apparently, Han suggests that an effective speaker should know well the audience, and a good speech, which "displeases the ear and upsets the heart" (Liao 28), would only be appreciated by the worthy audience. Equally apparent is Han's rhetorical psychology. Han emphasized that a speaker should know the heart and mind of the listener. He further explained himself in "Difficulties in the Way of Persuasion." He said,

> Difficulties in the way of persuasion, generally speaking, are not difficulties in my knowledge with which I persuade the ruler, nor are difficulties in my skill of argumentation which enables me to make my ideas clear, nor are difficulties in my courage to exert my ability without reserve. As a whole, the difficulties in the way of persuasion

> lie in my knowing the heart of the persuaded in order thereby to fit my wording into it.
>
> If the persuaded strives after high fame while your persuade him of big profit, you will be considered low-bred, accorded mean treatment, and shunned afar. If the persuaded strives after big profit while you persuade him of high fame, your will be considered mindless and ignorant of worldly affairs and will never be accepted. (Liao 106)

Here Han not only recognized the importance of knowing the motive of the listener, but also indicated the consequences of misunderstanding his motive. When a listener was a ruler, the speaker's misunderstanding of his motive would not only lead to a failed speech but also put his life in jeopardy. As Han warned, "You never intend to expose the ruler's secrets," and "if you happen to speak of anything he wants to conceal, you are then in danger, " and "if you talk about great men to him, he thinks that you are intimating his defects" (Liao 107).

In order to understand the listener's motive, the speaker would have to be aware of the human nature in general. In Han's point of view, a human being was basically "selfish, suspicious, envious, faultfinding, without gratitude, and cruelly demanding" (Oliver Communication 222). Because of this basic nature, an individual would easily misunderstand others' words, and likely mis-interpret a speech. Therefore, in order to effectively persuade the ruler without putting himself into danger, the speaker should seek to employ persuasive strategies. One of the rhetorical approaches that Han recommended was not the accuracy or truthfulness of a speech but a combination of the speaker's knowledge of the listener's motive, sensitivity

to the circumstance, and use of the utilitarian nature of the listener. Han explained,

> In general, the business of the persuader is to embellish the pride and obliterate the shame of the persuaded. If he has any private urgent need, you ought to encourage him with the cause of public justice. If the persuaded has a mean intention but cannot help it, you ought to praise its excellent points and minimize its harmfulness to the public.
>
> If you want the persuaded to adopt your suggestion to cultivate inter-state friendship, you ought to explain it in the light of a glorious cause and intimate its accord with his private interest. If you want to describe things dangerous and injurious to the state welfare, you ought to enumerate the reproaches and slanders against them first and then intimate their discord with his private interest. (108-9)

The foregoing discussion clearly illustrates some more differences between ancient Chinese and Western rhetoric in terms of the characteristics of the speaker, the audience, and the message. In ancient Western oratory, the speaker could be any individual who spoke to promote either self-interest or the benefits of a group. In ancient Chinese rhetoric, the speaker was also an individual, but one of male sex, authority, nobility, age, and with knowledge; his motive was to carry out his social duty, for example, to help the ruler make just policies and promote social harmony. Further, the audience of Western rhetoric was active and, to a certain extent, responsible for the success of a speech. But the role of an audience in ancient Chinese rhetoric was different. The audience usually meant *the* one person, the ruler, who was usually passive and less cooperative. Finally, in ancient Western rhetoric, the

message of the speech was much opinionated; different speakers brought about different opinions on the same subject. But in ancient Chinese rhetoric, the message was more or less in accord with the sages' words and social norms, and repetition of the same information could help the speaker make a good speech.

It also demonstrates that rhetoric is a cultural-specific phenomenon; different cultural, social, and historical conditions yield different norms, functions, and methods of rhetoric, and the examination of rhetoric should take place in a given context. Therefore, rhetoric of ancient China should be defined in its own terms and examined within the context in which it was embedded. Anything less than this would lead to groundless denial of its existence.

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